

The Struggles of Writing About Chinese Food as a Chinese Person

By Clarissa Wei April 18, 2017, 12:00pm

Lorraine Chuen was browsing her Facebook feed when she noticed an argument between a person of color and a white person, the latter of whom could not be convinced that food often does—and perhaps should—feel political for people of color. As a scientist formally trained in experimental psychology, Chuen was inspired to find quantifiable evidence that food is, indeed, extremely political.

“This was something that had been on my mind already. I wanted to find the data to show that structural oppression exists,” she says.

What she found: Of the 263 entries under the “Chinese” recipe filter on the *New York Times* food section, almost 90 percent have a white person listed as author in the byline. Only 10 percent of the recipes are authored by Chinese writers.

Chuen’s data set is open-sourced and her findings are meticulously broken down on her blog, Intersectional Analyst. She researched each of the author’s ethnicities and listed them publicly; after she published her post, some of the authors contacted her to confirm or dispute their ethnicities, and she revised her document accordingly.

She writes:

When I look at the repertoire of work that White chefs and restaurateurs have built on ethnic cuisine, it feels in a way, dehumanizing. White people are able to establish outrageously successful careers for being experts and authorities on the stuff that racialized folks do every day simply by existing. But of course, people of colour will rarely, if ever, be called experts on how to simply be themselves. It’s as if racialized folks and their ways of life are objects to be observed—study material, of sorts—rather than entire countries, cultures, and individual complex lives.

As a Chinese-American myself, who has built a career out of writing about Chinese food, the frustration that Chuen expresses in her post is all too familiar.

Chinese food was never fascinating for me; it is simply a part of who I am. My family would make annual pilgrimages back to Asia and growing up, the fluorescent streets of Tainan in southern Taiwan, rich with some of the best food in the world, were as much of a fixture in my life as the blistering hot pavement of Los Angeles flush with drive-thru burger joints. After school, my mom would take me to McDonalds for a Kid's Meal and for dinner, she'd cook us three-cups chicken (chicken legs slow-braised with one part rice wine, one part soy sauce, one part sesame oil), a steamed whole fish, a motley assortment of stir-fried vegetables, and pair it all with a cauldron of steaming hot white rice.

While I loved my mom's cooking, I grew to resent it. For show-and-tell, all I had to do was tell people what I ate for dinner last night and be met with wide-eyed gasps from my teachers and from my peers, a chorus of "ewwwws." I quickly became the weird kid who adored boiled pig intestines and fermented tofu.

"People were afraid of our ingredients," says Breana Lai, an associate food editor at EatingWell magazine, who is half-Chinese. "They would see our shrimp paste bottles and think it's this really horrific pot."

So imagine my surprise when the 2000s hit and, miraculously, the food of my people was suddenly cool.

"Fish sauce *just* turned popular in the last ten years," Lai says, laughing.

In 2006, travel shows began highlighting China, showing viewers firsthand what cuisine in the Far East is actually like. That same year, Los Angeles writer Jonathan Gold became the first food critic in the world to win a Pulitzer Prize. Among his highlighted works: a tribute to the fleshy, cold salted duck at Nanjing Kitchen in Los Angeles.

I was baffled. I grew up eating salted duck. Hell, in Taiwan we have a salted cold goose, which I find much more spectacular and refined than Nanjing's version.

In a weird turn of events, people were making money and becoming famous for eating the things I had grown up with and had been bullied for.

And so fresh out of college with a journalism degree under my belt, I headed straight into the world of food writing, capitalizing on the nation's growing obsession with my

people's food. I heavily researched the Chinese food scene in Los Angeles, piecing together maps and long listicles of restaurant after restaurant, indexed by region and dish and province. I found that 21 out of 34 provincial-level administrative units are represented in the Chinese restaurants in Los Angeles. Last year, I traveled to a dozen of those provinces and wrote articles on each one, breaking down the regional subtleties and traditions.

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I hold myself to high standards when it comes to writing about Chinese food, yet I live in a world that can be quite insensitive in their approach to the cuisine.

For example, many writers (especially on the East Coast) still use the Wades-Giles spelling of Chinese locations, a phonetic system that was invented by British diplomats Herbert Giles and Thomas Wade. It is a dictionary that is largely outdated and widely inaccurate in its representation of Chinese phonetics. In the Wade-Giles system, Sichuan is Romanized to Szechuan. Nanjing is Nanking. Beijing is called Peking. These writers are the same people who still refer to Guangdong province as Canton.

For his work, Giles won an award from the French Academy. Meanwhile, the Chinese laughed. Chinese scholar Gu Hongming declared that the Giles dictionary is “in no sense a dictionary at all. It is merely a collection of Chinese phrases and sentences, translated by Dr. Giles without any attempt at selection, arrangement, order or method.” To add insult to injury, Thomas Wade was a British soldier who fought and likely killed Chinese people in the First Opium War.

Our food is still largely looked on upon from the sidelines as a mysterious cuisine of antiquity. Only certain dishes like noodles, dumplings, kebabs, and rice bowls have been normalized. The majority is still largely stigmatized because, bluntly put, white people have not decided they like it yet.

You'd be hard pressed to find a cookbook dedicated to Chinese fermented tofu, which, in Western texts, is often described with a scent akin to rotting corpse. To me, blue cheese is far weirder. For goodness sakes, people—stinky tofu is *vegan*. Prosciutto, in the Western world, is glorified, but people have rarely heard of Chinese ham. Marco Polo allegedly brought ham-making techniques from the Chinese city of Jinhua to

Europe, and many of today's processing technologies for dry-cured hams have evolved from the techniques from this modest Chinese city.

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I tell people I love the texture of jellyfish head and still get weird looks. I pop bamboo shoots like candy and people stare at me like I'm eating bark (which, for the record, Chinese people *do* eat, but in medicinal stews).

When Taiwanese-American Cathy Erway, the author of Food in Taiwan, made the first round of pitches for her book, all the initial publishers declined.

"They didn't get the 'why' of this book," she says. "In a couple meetings it was fairly apparent that most people had no concept of where, what, and who was Taiwan. I fell in the awkward position of giving a geography as well as history lesson just to broach the topic of this book. It seems that publishers are shy of taking on a book that really has no precedent with which to make a reasonable estimate of sales figures."

Yet in Taiwan, I saw Erway's book in nearly every English bookstore I went to; there aren't many modern English cookbooks dedicated to the food of Taiwan.

I myself had many of my pitches labeled by as "too niche," only to find those same topics surface in articles by white people years later.

"The truth is that editors are more drawn to pitches by recipe developers and writers that are more like them," Lai says.

Consequently, context is lost in a lot of pieces about Chinese food.

"Nobody actually tries to interview people in the Asian restaurant or the workers or have any sort of conversation," Soleil Ho, chef, food writer, and the founder of Racist Sandwich, a podcast about food and race. "I think it's this perception that these people don't speak English so that that talking to them will be trouble."

People will complain incessantly on Yelp if a bowl of Chinese noodles goes over \$10. However, the sheer labor and brute skill that goes into a bowl of hand-pulled noodles is absolutely mind-blowing. Pasta pales in comparison. I know this because I went to a beef noodle soup school in the north of China. There, every single day, one must pull dough at least 100 times a day. The type of noodles varies by location. There are knife-shaved, hand-pulled, and hand-torn noodles. There are belt noodles, thin noodles, short noodles, noodles made with rice, with arrowroot, with wheat, with potato starch.

In China, I learned that the secret to the elasticity of hand-pulled noodles is an obscure desert plant.

Imagine if a hipster white chef started making pasta and enhanced it with salt bushes in the Mojave desert. He'd receive a roaring, standing applause and a string of awards. Chinese people have been doing the equivalent of that for centuries.

Clocking in at about 5,000 years, China is the longest continuous civilization in the world. The Chinese, after all, were master farmers and cooks. Though the country only has 10 percent of arable land worldwide, they produce food for 20 percent of the world's population.

Yet, here in the West, we read and commission more stories about poop-themed restaurants, Communist hot pot eateries, and dog-eating festivals than deeply, thoughtfully researched pieces on Chinese pickling techniques and the art of Chinese lamb roasts.

There's an ancient Chinese recipe that dates back to the Tang Dynasty, in which a fat goose is stuffed into the belly cavity of a whole lamb, and then hung from a frame over a slow fire. It is roasted until the lamb skin is burnt and crisp and the goose well-done. As it cooks in the belly cavity, the goose absorbs the taste of the lamb, while retaining its own tenderness and flavor.

And so imagine my disbelief when Turducken became a groundbreaking culinary phenomenon.

Please, think about who you give the microphone to.

People also tend to lump Chinese cuisine into one large category, unaware of the vast regional differences.

“I was pitching to some major magazine a story about Shanghainese-style food,” freelance journalist Tienlon Ho says. “And they said, ‘Well, we just had a story about Sichuan already, so China is already covered for the year.’ That really surprised me because this was a magazine I respected and they had a full Italian issue and a French issue.” For the record, Shanghainese and Sichuanese cuisine are polar opposites. Shanghainese food is fundamentally sweet in flavor. It’s not inundated with spices; preservatives are used sparingly; and while soy sauce is a common ingredient, dishes tend to veer to the softer side. Sichuanese cooking is much more sharp. It is known for its bold use of chili peppers, garlic, and the elusive Sichuan peppercorn—a spice that will literally numb your tongue.

I must note: There are great pieces of works on Chinese food by white people out there. Carolyn Phillips, for example, a white woman, recently came out with a fantastically written recipe book on Chinese regional cuisine called All Under Heaven. Phillips, who is fluent in Chinese, is a meticulous researcher, lived in Taiwan for eight years and married a Chinese guy, and worked as a court interpreter of Mandarin for over a decade.

At the end of the day, this is a systemic issue. It is not the fault of writers, per se. It is the gatekeepers, the editors, and the publishers that should be aware of this imbalance of representation.

Generations ago, there was a real lack of Chinese speaking writers of Chinese descent. But this is 2017, where there are more than 3.8 million Chinese people in the United States. Yet white people are still the dominant representatives of Chinese food in mainstream media.

There are over 1.3 billion Chinese people in China, yet six out of the top ten chefs profiled in Asia’s 50 Best Restaurants 2017 are white men.

Please, think about who you give the microphone to.

I’ve met Chinese restaurateurs here in Los Angeles County who have been unable to open restaurants in certain locations because they are not “mainstream and trendy”

enough. I've been forwarded actual emails written by the city representatives to those restaurateurs with those exact words. "We need to find something mainstream and trendy," the emails say.

I've read too many articles rooted in the exoticization of my people's food, written by white writers who don't speak a lick of Chinese.

History has a way of erasing our role in our own food.

"A good researcher and writer may be able to winnow out that backstory, but it will be third-person, as opposed to a writer who has lived that culture, who can write from a much deeper personal point of view," says freelance journalist Grace Hwang Lynch, whose work focuses on Chinese home cooking.

"I don't believe that only Chinese people can write about Chinese food, as there also many good Asian food journalists who could do a fantastic job covering French pastries. But Chinese-American writers who can cover Chinese food should be sought out for their personal insight and the humanity they can bring to these narratives."

I don't air these grievances in a vain attempt of recognition, as a Chinese woman who writes about Chinese food. I write this because history has a way of erasing our role in our own food.

In California, when Chinese farmers first arrived to the swampy shores of the Sacramento Valley in the 1850s, the story is that they looked at the land and cried. Eventually, with the help of the Japanese, they were able to convert the area to a productive piece of land.

Land prices increased four-fold. Property values soared, and soon bankers and land companies rushed in. Rice became one of the most profitable agricultural industries of the state—the new gold.

But a backlash arose as more established Americans began to vilify the Asian settlers who had created this industry and, in their opinions, could steal jobs that were rightfully theirs. By 1913, this ongoing discrimination caused California's Alien Land Law to be passed, barring most Asian immigrants from starting their own farms by prohibiting non-citizens from owning property. Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian tenant

farmers were forced to lease land from white landowners, yet still produced most of the rice at that time.

Today, the California rice industry is \$5 billion business and Chinese people have, to no one's surprise, largely been erased from its history.

So yes. Food is political for us; it always has been. It is time we give Chinese people the recognition they deserve.

Start by letting us tell our own stories.